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ABSTRACT

The African American woman has commanded widespread public attention, but popular misconceptions of her socioeconomic role and status differ sharply from her actual situation. The following basic characteristics of the contemporary African American woman, drawn from census figures, are outlined: (1) demographically, females comprise a majority of the African American population and they are a relatively young subgroup; (2) the fertility rate of African American women is decreasing, and while the fertility rate for African Americans in the 10-19 years old age range is triple that of their White counterparts, the White fertility rate is higher in the 25-34 years old age range; (3) almost two-thirds of African American women are presently married or have been married, almost 77 percent of married African American women have their husbands present, and about half of all African American families are female-headed; (4) although African American females have achieved significant advancement over the years, educational attainment remains disproportionately low compared to White females; and (5) high unemployment rates and employment in low-paying jobs continue to limit the well-being of African American women. As a group, African American females present a wide variation in socioeconomic status. While highly educated African American women earn higher wages than their White counterparts, the larger segment of African American women constitutes the poorest racial gender group in the nation. All African American women, regardless of socioeconomic status, must help develop a strong African American community. (FMW)

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RUNTA (TRUTH)

The National Urban League Research Department Fact Sheet

Volume 2 Number 2 May 1989

The African American Woman

- **Fertility among African American women continues to be a subject of considerable confusion and misunderstanding.**
- **Although they have realized significant advancement over the years, the educational status of African American women remains a matter of deep concern.**
- **Their employment and income status set severe, pervasive limits on the well-being of contemporary African American women.**

From the Editor...

Throughout the history of African Americans, the African American woman has assumed numerous roles--mother, socializer, nurturer, breadwinner, catalyst, visionary. Even in the worst of times, the African American woman, like her male counterpart, has exhibited perseverance, resourcefulness, and resilience. These characteristics are no less significant now than they have been in generations past. To the contrary, the status and roles of the contemporary African American woman continue to epitomize the broader African American experience and greatly in form discussions of problems and prospects.

Recent portrayals of the African American woman, however, suggest a need to put her condition into sharper focus. The popular TV mini-series, "The Women of Brewster Place," is a case in point. This mini-series and other media presentations raise a general question about the accuracy of public perceptions concerning the socioeconomic status of contemporary African American woman. As we approach the year 2000 and the serious challenge that lie ahead, views on the basic exigencies of African American life must be anchored in sound empirical knowledge.

Accordingly, this edition of *Runta* presents an empirical profile of the African American woman along key socioeconomic dimensions. For more responsive policy-making as well as more effective self-help endeavors, we believe that the larger public and African Americans themselves need improved understanding of the African American woman--her status, her needs, and yes, her growing prominence as an agent of racial progress.

Read and reflect...

Betty Collier Watson

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Whether in relation to concerns about unwed motherhood, welfare dependency, or the triple issue of racism, sexism, and classism in the labor market, the African American woman commands widespread attention in public discussion. However, these discussions are often based on misinformation, half-truth, and distortion. Indeed, in some instances, the popular perception differs sharply from the actual situation of the African American woman vis a vis that of her white counterpart. It is important to rectify this problem, just as we need to eliminate harmful misconceptions and stereotypes regarding the African American community in general. Available data are illuminating and instructive on some basic characteristics of the African American woman.

❑ Demographically, females continue to comprise a majority of the African American population, and they are a relatively young subgroup.

*In 1988, the number of African American females stood at 15,874,000, which represents 52.4% of all African Americans, 6.5% of the total U.S. population, and 12.6% of the total U.S. female population.

*Since 1960, the number of African American females has increased by 52.5%. By the year 2000, their numbers will have increased an additional 15.6%, to 18.3 million.

*The average age of African American females is 29, and more than 52% of them are below the age of 30. By contrast, white females average 35 years, with only about 42% being younger than 30.

*African American females live longer than males, by an average of 8 years. However, they have a considerably shorter life expectancy (73.5 years) than white females (78.8 years). The latter disparity has closed some since 1960, when the difference was 7.3 years.

*The death rate for African American females is about 734 per 100,000 population. This is 25.7% lower than the death rate among African American males, but 13% higher than the rate for white females.

❑ Fertility among African American women continues to be a subject of considerable confusion and misunderstanding.

*Contrary to popular belief, the fertility rate for African American women is declining, and their average age of childbirth is rising. The highest fertility rate for African American females occurs among adults age 20-24 (133 births per 1,000 persons), *not* among teenagers.

*While the fertility rates for African American females in the youngest age group (10-19 years) triple those of their white counterparts, white fertility rates are higher in the 25-34 age range. By the year 2000, the average age of childbearing is projected to grow by one year for women of both races.

❑ While the marital situation of African women has generated a great deal of commentary, public perception of their status is largely misguided.

*Almost two-thirds of African American women are presently married or have been married--married, 41.1%; been married, 22.0%.

*About 77% of married African American women have their husband present, compared to 95.2% of whites married women.

*Some 37% of African American women are single and have never been married, which is about a 77% higher never-married rate than exist among their white counterparts.

*In 1988, about half of all African American families were female-headed. Of these female households, only 11.2% were single/never married, while 25.5% were married with their spouse present.

*Slightly more than 50% all African American children under 18 years of live with the mother only.

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Runta provides timely data and analyses on African Americans. It is issued as a public service. Direct inquires to: Dr. Betty C. Watson, Editor.

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❒ Although they have realized significant advancement over the years, the educational status of African American women remains a matter of deep concern.

*In general, African American females are dropping out of school at the same rate as males. Close to 16% of both males and females in the 14-34 year-old age group are high school dropouts. The corresponding figures for whites are 12.1% and 10.6% for males and females, respectively.

*Enrollment of African American women in institutions of higher education increased notably between 1970 and 1986, by about 41%. However, while they are better represented in such institutions than their male counterparts, African American women are still underrepresented compared to their proportion of the general population. They account for only 5.2% of all college and university students.

*The majority of African American women who complete post-secondary education earn the lower level degrees. In the 1984-85 school year, they received 5.0% of all Associate degrees, but only 3.6% of all baccalaureate and 3.1% of all Master's degrees. A mere 1.8% of all doctorate degrees were awarded to African American women.

❒ Their employment and income status set severe, pervasive limits on the well-being of contemporary African American women.

*In 1988, the average unemployment rate among African American women was 11.7%, or 2.5 times the jobless rate for white women. On the other hand, counter to persisting myths about work effort, the labor force participation rate of African American women (57.6%) exceeded that of whites by 2.1%.

*Employed African American women are still concentrated on less prestigious, lower paying occupations and in the lower paying positions within occupations. About 48% of African American female workers are in service occupations. More than two-thirds of those in "technical, sales and administrative support" fields hold the lowest paying, clerical jobs.

*In 1987, the average income for year-round full-time African American female workers was $16,211, which was about 91% of the income of their white counter parts. Overall, African American women averaged just 82% of the income of white women, and more than 13% had no income at all.

*The income gap among female-headed households in 1987 was particularly pronounced. African American female-headed households averaged $9,710, or barely 57% of the income of white female-headed households.

*In 1987, nearly 3.8 million (32.5%) of all African American women were poor. Contrary to popular belief, 23% of these poor African American women worked during the previous year. Over half of all female-headed African American families subsisted below the poverty level.

As one reviews the contemporary status of the African American woman, one is reminded of the duality expressed in the introduction to *Tale of Two Cities*. In some respects, the present might be viewed as "...the best of times and the worst of times..." for the African American woman.

On the one hand, the average earnings of those African American women who are highly educated exceeds the earnings of their white counterparts. On the other hand, the larger segment of African American women are the poorest racial gender group in the nation. Similarly, married African American women with children enjoy middle income status, while singles with children are barely subsisting.

It is important that, independently of socioeconomic status, each African American woman remembers that, ultimately, her individual future is intimately linked with the future of the African American people as a whole--male and female. Thus, it is through strengthening such linkages, in all areas of life, that a stronger African African community will emerge.

SOURCES: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, No. 433; Series P-25, No. 1018; Series P-60, No. 161. National Urban League Research Department, *Quarterly Economic Report on the African American Worker*, Report No. 19. Unpublished data from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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